

**The non-alignment of espoused theories of action to theories-in-use: Socio-cultural hurdles to provision of equitable educational opportunity for pregnant learners at South African conventional schools**

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On attainment of democracy, South Africa ratified several international conventions such as UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), which all among other objectives, seek to attain gender equality in education. This study investigated how, despite their formal access to schooling, pregnant learners at two high schools in Vhembe district of South Africa faced challenges in actively participation in schooling. The study used key participant and focus group interviews to gather the views of 6 pregnant learners enrolled at two formal schools, 12 mainstream learners, and 12 teachers on the participation of pregnant learners in school curriculum activities. The study revealed that although the country's bill of rights and the education policy on the management of pregnancy in schools created prospects for equal educational provision for pregnant teenagers in South Africa, on the ground, there were conservative socio-cultural beliefs, values and norms that militated against pregnant teenagers' full educational participation and opportunity. The study therefore concluded that there is a split between official policy and practice, or espoused theories of action and the actual theories-in-use which negatively impacted on equal educational opportunity for enrolled pregnant learners in South African formal schools.

**Key words:** espoused theory; theory-in-use; formal schooling; educational opportunity; pregnant learner.

The vision for universal basic education or Education for All (EFA) by 2015 is internationally acclaimed as enunciated in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG) which South Africa is part to. However, one of the major impediments to the achievement of universal basic education, especially in most of the developing nations is the high prevalence of gender inequality in educational access, completion and performance rates (Stromquist, 2005; UNESCO, 2004; UNICEF, 2002; UNICEF, 2003a). This implies that any nation that hopes to realise Education for All (EFA) by the targeted date should eliminate all gender related imbalances from both its

education policy design and institutional programs and practices. With the realisation that the education of girls and women is one unfulfilled fundamental human right, the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), all have a clause that is exclusively devoted to the principle of gender equality, especially for the enhancement of access to and completion of education by girls and women at all levels by 2015 (UNICEF, 2003a , 2003b; UNESCO, 2000, 2004; UNESCO, 2005).

To show its commitment to the elimination of gender inequalities in education, South Africa ratified international conventions that seek to redress gender inequalities in education (Wolpe, Quinland & Martinez, 1997; Sadie, 2001). Consequently, its Constitution's Bill of Rights and Act of parliament on education uphold the right to education for all South Africans, regardless of any of their differences (Constitution of Republic of South Africa, Number 108, 1996; Prinsloo, 2005; Bray, 1996; South African Schools Act [SASA] Number 84, 1996:4). It is in this respect that pregnant teenagers of school going age are also extended the right to formal schooling (Department of Education [DoE], 2007; Manzini, 2001; Grant & Hallman, 2006; Kaufman deWet & Stadler, 2001). There is therefore a national policy that instructs and guides schools to integrate girls who might fall pregnant while at school (DoE, 2007).

This study investigated how school-based education stakeholder catered for the educational needs of the enrolled pregnant learners at two schools.

*Theoretical Framework: Espoused theory of action and theory-in-use*

The espoused theory of action is what a person believes in but may not necessarily implement it in actual actions, which is called theory-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1974). However, people usually justify their behaviour in given situations by referring to the espoused theory of action because it is more reasonable and acceptable to human standards. In simple terms, the difference between the espoused theory and theory-in-use is like saying one thing and doing the other. In their definition and distinction between espoused theory of action and theory-in-use, Argyris and Schon (1974:6-7) who are the proponents of the theory, observe that:

When someone is asked how he would behave under certain circumstances, the answer he usually gives is his espoused theory of action for that situation. This is the theory of action to which he gives allegiance, and which, upon request, he communicates to others.

However, the theory that actually governs his actions is his theory-in-use, which may or may not be compatible with his espoused theory (Argyris & Schon, 1974:6-7).

In this case, the theory-in-use is the overt behaviour which is inferred from how people act. The theory-in-use is socially constructed during interaction and therefore is culturally embedded (Argyris, 1990; Argyris & Schon, 1974). To this end, Argyris and Schon (1974:11) add that "versions of the same model of theories-in-use result from similar upbringing within a culture".

This proposition has an important implication for this study, which investigated how the school social environment influenced the perceptions and treatment of learners who chose to continue with their education while pregnant. This paper demonstrates that it is not enough to ratify international conventions and design policy measures that aim to uphold pregnant children's right to education. There is need for a paradigm shift, in terms of socio-cultural and traditional values, norms, beliefs and attitudes or the governing values which social actors in schools hold towards pregnant girls who choose to pursue their educational aspirations. Policy change that does not also inform people to change their values, norms and traditions is unlikely to achieve changing the status quo. Thus, while the South African education policy stipulates that pregnant girls have the right to schooling, effective benefits from the policy depends largely on how school stakeholders perceive and treat the enrolled pregnant learners on a daily basis.

*Education as a basic human right*

The human rights discourse provides a powerful framework for analysis of gender inequalities in education because international statutes like the CRC, CEDAW, EFA, MDG, SADC Declaration on Gender and Development, the Nairobi, Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action (PfA) and Forward-Looking Strategies (FLS) on gender equality, all pronounce that education is a basic human right to be equally accessed and benefited by all men

and women (Subrahmanian, 2005; Stromquist 1997, 2005; Chilisa, 2002; Bayona & Kandji-Murangi, 1996). Since education is a key human right for women emancipation, UN member states that consented to international instruments on gender equality have the obligation to extend the right to education for pregnant learners, who could risk leaving school prematurely (Sadie, 2001; Chilisa, 2002; Gordon, 2002). In this regard, countries that still have expulsion policies for pregnant students are grossly violating the right of their citizens to both education and are could miss the EFA and MDG targets in 2015 of achieving gender equality at all levels of education (Stromquist, 1997, 199, 2005; Subrahmanian, 2005). On the other hand, countries like South Africa which has a continuation or re-entry school enrolment policy for pregnant schoolgirls are consistent with the observation that education is a basic human right (Chilisa, 2002).

#### *Impact of teenage pregnancy on women educability*

Teenage pregnancy continues to be one major cause of the difference in transition and attrition rates between male and female students at all levels of education the world over (Weiner 1987; Stromquist 1998, 1999, 2005; Ladner, 1987; Gallup-Black & Weitzman, 2004) and therefore remains a challenge to the achievement of the set international goals on universal basic education (UNESCO, 2000, 2004, 2005; Stromquist, 2005). With reference to the sub-Saharan African region, statistics from a study by the Forum for African Women Educators (FAWE) indicated that only 34% and 10% of the girls in the region completed primary and secondary education respectively (Chilisa, 2002). With specific focus on South Africa, Lloyd and Mensch (2006) show that 31% of the girls left school due to pregnancy while 9% dropped out due to marriage by 1998 (Lloyd & Mensch, 2006). Latest studies still indicate that South Africa's teenage pregnancy rate has remained above 15% (Panday, Makiwane, Ranchod & Letsoalo, 2009), which could be indicative of the high demand for educational space for pregnant teenagers in schools.

#### *The landscape of gender equity policies and programmes in education*

Although the United Nations Human Rights Declaration of 1948 clearly states that education is one of the fundamental human rights, the issue of gender equality in access to and participation in education was initially not specifically eluded to in the declaration (Stromquist, 1998). It was only after the commemoration of UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) that research on women's social and education conditions was encouraged, resulting in feminists, women organizations and NGOs agitating for gender equity in all spheres of life (Stromquist, 1998, Coulter, 1999). The UNDP Report of 1994 included education as a key human security measure because women who are more vulnerable to abuse by men are those that are usually denied adequate educational access, participation and outcomes. However, developed countries like US and England enacted laws which prohibited discrimination against women in education, which however initially emphasised mere equal access to educational facilities and curriculum (Coulter, 1999; Wolpe, Quinlin & Martinez, 1997; Ladner, 1987; Weimer, 1987; Truscott, 1994). For example, the USA Educational Amendments Act of 1972 (Title IX) and the Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA) of 1975 only prohibited sex discrimination in educational programs and activities without any analysis of the social process that gave rise to the stereotyped and asymmetric gender categorisation (Stromquist, 1999). Similarly, the British Education Act of 1944 which enshrined the concept of equal opportunity by making education free and compulsory for all children up to the age of 15 years was also a watered-down approach to gender equality, which was adopted by neo-liberal political systems to only pacify feminist movements' struggle for anti-sexist policies without real substantive change (Stromquist, 1999; Coulter, 1999; Truscott, 1994). These developments and earlier efforts by feminists to demand for equal employment opportunities for men and women resulted in the issue of gender equity in education also occupying a wider space in international declarations like

CEDAW, CRC, EFA and MDG. With time, the principle that universal basic education cannot be realised without both adequate access to and participation in education by women, became adopted and explicitly stated in these international legal frameworks (UNESCO, 2000, 2004; Stromquist, 2005).

Even in developed states like the USA, exclusion and expulsion of pregnant students had for a long time been the norm as earlier observed by Ladner (1987:61) that “Until recently, efforts were not made to maintain the pregnant girl in school on a consistent basis”. Although the American Educational Amendments Acts (Title IX) of 1972 and the Women’s Educational Equity Act (WEEA) of 1975 both prohibited unfair treatment of pregnant learners, mainstreaming them in formal schools was resisted by most education administrators, which society at large condoned (Weiner, 1987; Ladner, 1987).

After realisation that sex education was failing to prevent the increase in teen pregnancy (Fletcher, et al, 2008; Bennett & Asseffi, 2005) and that schools with comprehensive health clinics for both pre- and post-natal education and care had more of their teen mothers graduating into high school and college, school programs that accommodated pregnant girls began to gain support (Key, Barbosa & Owens, 2001; Ladner, 1987; Weiner, 1987). Key, Barbosa and Owens (2001) indicated that school programs called ‘New Feature Schools’ and ‘Second Chance Clubs’ that integrated pregnant teenagers in the USA had inclusive academic classes and separate courses for pregnant teenagers on maternal health, child development and care; counselling services for the pregnant teenagers, their classmates, families and spouses, if identified; on-campus childcare services and parenting-learning laboratories for pregnant girls and teen mothers; on-campus health clinics and flexible timetables which allowed the pregnant learners and teen mothers to attend regular classes as well as special lessons on the social, psychological and emotional challenges associated with early pregnancy.

The inclusion of pregnant learners in formal education is a recent phenomenon in the developing countries, especially in the African continent due to conservative beliefs on sexuality and marriage (Runhare, 2010; Runhare & Vandeyar, 2011, 2012). In fact, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) of 1990 only entered into force on 29 November 1999 and until recently, the charter has been ratified by only 35 of the continent’s 53 countries that constitute the African Union (7<sup>th</sup> meeting of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 2005). Furthermore, not many African countries have come up with legislative measures that directly protect pregnant and parenting girls and women from discrimination in formal education. With the exception of Botswana, all the other countries with pregnant and parenting education policies had such policies instituted after 1990 (Hubbard et al, 2008; Meekers & Ahmed, 1999; Chilisa, 2002; Bayona & Kandji-Murangi, 1996; Gordon, 2002; Mitchell et al, 1999).

In South Africa, where this study was conducted, Manzini (2001:48) indicates that “The existing schools policy allows pregnant girls to continue with schooling both during the pregnancy and after the birth”. Grant and Hallman (2006:3) also concur that “a policy formalised in South Africa in 1996 ... allows pregnant girls to stay in school and also allows young mothers to do so if they can manage logistically and financially”. Added to this, the Department of Education published a specific policy document that guides schools on prevention and management of schoolgirl pregnancy (DoE, 2007) after which the then Minister of Education clarified that “pregnant schoolgirls have a right to education and cannot be expelled from school because they are pregnant” (Pandor, 2007:4). While all these policy developments are important, policies alone without the political will of the school-based stakeholders may not provide for the equitable educational provision for enrolled pregnant teenagers, no matter how well-crafted they may be (Jansen, 2001). This study therefore set out to investigate how school-based education stakeholders at two schools that enrolled

pregnant learners responded to the responsibility of catering for the educational needs of pregnant schoolgirls.

#### *The research problem and objective*

The increase in the rate of teenage pregnancy the world over is well recorded (Gallup-Black & Weitzman, 2004; Jackson & Abosi, 2007; Manzini, 2001; Meekers & Ahmed, 1999). It is also evident from research that pregnancy is one of the key reasons for school drop out by girls, especially in developing countries where interventions for maintaining pregnant teenagers in school are at the infancy stages (Chigona & Chetty, 2008; Bennett & Asseffi, 2005; Grant & Hallman, 2006; Gallup-Black & Weitzman, 2004; Gordon, 2002; Hof & Richters, 1999; UNICEF, 2008; Mitchell et al, 1999).

One of the interventions that is gaining international support to bridge the gap between male and female educational access, participation and performance is the re-enrolment and continued enrolment of teenage mothers and pregnant teenagers (Chigona & Chetty, 2008; Chilisa, 2002; Bayona & Kandji-Murangi, 1996; Hubbard, et al, 2008; Grant & Hallman, 2006; Stromquist, 1999). South Africa designed policy guidelines that direct schools on inclusion of pregnant girls and teenage mothers to continue with their education (DoE, 2007; Grant & Hallman, 2006; Pandor, 2007; Manzini, 2001; Chigona & Chetty, 2008; Hubbard, et al, 2008). However, while such formal policy measures could be in place, the extent to which they are being effectively implemented to benefit the affected learners is still subject to speculation because it is not uncommon for policies to be in place while implementers and beneficiaries are not adequately empowered to effect the desired change (Jansen, 2001, 2002). The capacity of schools to effectively cater for the educational needs and aspirations of pregnant learners is a cause of concern, especially in Limpopo where the population of pregnant teenagers in formal schools is high (Panday, Makiwane, Ranchod & Letsoalo, 2009). This study therefore sought to explore the efforts schools are putting to achieve equitable educational opportunity

for pregnant learners they enrol. Specifically, the study investigated how school-based education stakeholders at two schools that enrolled pregnant learners undertook their expected responsibility of catering for the educational needs of pregnant schoolgirls.

#### *Research questions*

1. How do socio-cultural perceptions and attitudes affect the educational access, participation and performance of pregnant learners?
2. What barriers militate against the effective implementation of the policy on inclusion of pregnant school girls at South African conventional schools?

#### **Method**

Qualitative research was employed for intensive exploration of how key stakeholders in the school responded to the educational needs of pregnant learners within a formal teaching and learning setting. Although in line with national policy guidelines on management of schoolgirl pregnancy, it is now common to find pregnant girls attending formal schooling in South Africa (Pandor, 2007; Runhare, 2010; Runhare & Vandeyar 2011, 2012), not all schools will have enrolled pregnant learners at any given time. Therefore, purposive sampling (Seamark & Lings, 2004; Creswell, 2007; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Silverman, 2005) was used to identify schools that had pregnant learners at the time the study was conducted. At the selected two schools, subjects were also purposively selected because they were either teaching or learning with pregnant learners at the time of data gathering. Study subjects were therefore selected because they had the experience on the subject of the study, either as teachers or classmates of pregnant learners. The study sample comprised of 6 pregnant learners, 12 teachers and 12 mainstream learners. The 12 teachers and 12 mainstream learners taught and learnt with the sampled pregnant learners respectively. From each of the two schools where pregnant girls attended at the time of data gathering, the

following were therefore included into the sample of the study:

- Three pregnant learners from each school participated in individual key participant interviews with one of the researchers, who is also a child counsellor, to explore their learning needs and challenges.
- Six teachers who taught or were class teachers of pregnant learners at each school participated in focus group interviews.
- Six mainstream learners from each school, who were learning with pregnant girls at the time when the study was conducted, were selected to participate in focus group interviews.

#### *Quality measures*

There was gender disaggregating of the sampled participants for focus group interviews such that male and female participants had separate focus group interview sessions, and the six pregnant learners were individually interviewed. Due to the sensitive nature of the problem of schoolgirl pregnancy, permission to conduct the study was sought from the District Education management, school principals and parents/guardians of pregnant learners who volunteered to participate. In order to build trust, voluntary participation and allay any misconceptions on the study, senior teachers at each school assisted to identify learners and teachers and to explain the objectives of the study. After the volunteers were identified, letters of consent and voluntary participation were explained and administered to the school principal, parents or guardians of pregnant school girls, teachers and the mainstream learners who agreed to participate in the study.

### **Results**

*School-based education stakeholders' responses to inclusion of pregnant teenagers*  
Focus group discussions indicated that all the teachers and learners who participated in this study did not know that the Department of Education had in 2007 instituted a policy provision which regulates and guides schools in preventing

and managing schoolgirl pregnancy (Department of Education, 2007). It emerged from interview findings that even school principals at both schools did not have adequate details on this policy. As illustrated by responses cited below, when asked to justify why they did not to expel learners who fell pregnant at their schools, both principals made reference to the country's democratic constitution and bill of rights rather than the relevant education policy. The principal at school 1 gave a more political than administrative response to the question by indicating that:

*It's obvious, in this new democracy; we cannot use the apartheid laws which denied such learners the right to education. It is clear from the new constitution that education is a right not a privilege and schools cannot be found expelling learner because of pregnancy. That would be contradicting the laws and constitution of the country (Principal, School 1).*

In the same manner, when asked to give any relevant education policy that allowed the school to maintain pregnant learners in the school, the other principal was even more general and evasive in his response:

*Who are we as a school to deny a child the right to her education because of something as natural as falling pregnant? Look, the government gives these girls a child grant, which is a sign that it accepts their mistake. As a school we should follow the example of government to promote equality in education as stated in the Bill of Rights (Principal, School 2).*

As a confirmation of lack of knowledge on the national education policy on teenage pregnancy, both principals indicated that it was their first time to see the Department of Education (2007) policy guidelines on prevention and management of pregnancy in schools when it was presented to them by the researchers of this study. Through this observation, the study therefore revealed that the Department of Basic Education had formulated a policy, with either an inadequate consultative dialogue

process or without disseminating it to the grassroots of its sub-systems such as district, circuit and school management.

Likewise, all the sampled male and female teachers at the two schools only held an assumption that there should be a policy that allowed pregnant learners to continue with their studies though they all had not read of such a policy. Most of the teachers used the scapegoat that they were not in school administration, like one who gave the excuse that:

*As a mere teacher I cannot be expected to know about policies. Such documents are known by school management or the SGB at least. The fact that the school allows pregnant girls means that it's according to government policy (Female teacher, school 2).*

Laying the blame on school management for lack of transparency on how pregnant learners are allowed to continue with schooling was found common among teachers at both schools. Concerns were raised by most of the interviewed teachers that it was unfair to be asked about policy issues because they had no role to play in policy formulation. Among the teachers, the general view was that their main responsibility was to teach the learners whom the school principal enrolled, and therefore according to one male teacher:

*In the first place we are not consulted as subject teachers on enrolment issues. We are employed to teach. The principal can best explain why pregnant learners are not expelled from school. As a subject teacher I cannot know about the policy on pregnant learners (Male teacher, school 1).*

The same view was expressed by a female class teacher at school 1 who indicated that *"although there are now two learners who are seemingly pregnant in my class, I have never been consulted by the principal to discuss the problem according to any school policy"*.

With all these observations, we concluded that the lack of knowledge by educators on the stated national policy guidelines on

prevention and management of schoolgirl pregnancy (DoE, 2007), was largely a result of inadequate policy dialogue and dissemination process within the whole Department of Basic Education right from the top down to the school level. This largely explained why this study also revealed that teachers had little to formally guide them on how to handle pregnant learners within the school and classroom settings.

*Socio-cultural perceptions to equitable educational provision for pregnant learners within a formal school setting*

Without the necessary professional guidance, this study found that teachers and learners' treatment of and attitudes towards pregnant learners were socially constructed and informed by their traditional and socio-cultural belief systems on unplanned pregnancy and marriage. As illustrated by narrative data from the study participants which are presented in this section, societal negative views on unplanned teenage pregnancy had an equally negative impact on pregnant learners' educational access and participation.

Narrative accounts from the sampled teachers and mainstream learners seem to point that there is general opposition to the continued enrolment of pregnant learners at formal schools. We summarised and categorised the arguments raised against the inclusion of pregnant learners in formal classroom settings into the following three socio-cultural themes:

- Societal moral decay and parental permissiveness
- Misplaced child and democratic rights
- Loss of school authority

A synthesis of the arguments raised in the focus group discussions by teachers and the classmates of the learners who were pregnant at the time when the study was conducted implied that the presence of pregnant girls in schools was largely blamed for the decline in school discipline because they were *"cultural and rule benders who detracted us and learners from being serious with their responsibilities"*, according to one female teacher at school 1. This view represented the general

perception of most of the interviewed teachers and mainstream learners, which we present in this section.

*Societal moral decay and parental permissiveness*

Most interviewed teachers blamed society's decline in sexual and marriage values for the increase in teenage and schoolgirl pregnancies "*which has resulted in schools being turned into maternity hospitals than learning centres*" according to a male teacher at school 1. The interviewed teachers at both schools complained that because the community now lacked strong marriage ties to act as role models to the youths, children talked about sex and viewed sex on social media even in the presence of adults like teachers and this made learners not to concentrate on their schoolwork. As a demonstration that sexual issues were no more confined to adulthood and marriage, but had encroached into the public spheres like politics, business, workplace and schools, both male and female teachers felt disempowered to control pregnant schoolgirls. To express his disappointment on moral decay in this generation, a male teacher complained that:

*How can children value school when they hear of rape, murder and sexual immorality of their own parents? They view sex on television, in the newspapers, where people appear naked to their family members. To girls, being modern is to engage in sex at a young age and to tell them to be serious with school is waste of time* (Male teacher, school 2).

In congruence to the above view, a highly experienced and elderly male teacher made a comparison between what seemed to him as the good olden days and the deteriorating sexual morality in the current generation. According to him, this was the cause of the teenage pregnancies that schools faced because:

*These pregnant learners show how sexually immoral society has become today. I have taught for over 25 years and I have witnessed a lot of decay in how pupils behave and nobody seems to care yet they expect good passes from someone who is*

*struggling to learn while pregnant. If society does not care, teachers also will not worry themselves* (Male elderly teacher, school 1).

In their disapproval of inclusion of pregnant learners in school, female teachers also added their voice by also pointing out that this was a reflection for moral decay in society, as illustrated by one who felt betrayed that:

*As a woman, I always feel ashamed and disgraced by some of the mothers who allow their children to come to school in this state. We should not blame the girls, it is society that is destroying education and making the young generation to loose direction* (Female teacher, school 2).

As an indication from the extract below, female teachers at school 1 also felt the same, but added that the blame should not only be laid on the pregnant girls but even on boys because:

*There is too much sex before marriage today and even married people don't respect marriage values today. Most of these boys have condomising even for children. This makes schools not to have good learning environment today* (Female teacher, school 1).

The encroachment of the moral decay from the community to the school system through teenage pregnancy was also echoed by the mainstream learners who learnt with pregnant learners at the time when the study was conducted. At both schools, the mainstream learners cried foul that, "*how can we be mixed with expecting mothers and be expected to focus on studies*" (Grade 12 male student, school 2). As illustrated by selected extracts from the learners' narrative accounts, the common concern from mainstream learners was that society was too lenient on schoolgirls who fall pregnant. A male learner went to the extent of blaming failure rate in schools to the existence of pregnant girls in the classroom by logging a complain that:



*To call a spade a spade on this matter, the government is letting down those of us who are here to learn by allowing expecting girls to be in school. That's why we slumber all the time when seated next to a pregnant one. We cannot concentrate during lessons and we can fail because of all this rot (Grade 12 male student, school 2).*

From the female students' point of view, the same concern raised by their male counterparts on the neglect by society to arrest the infectious social problem of schoolgirl pregnancy was also clearly underscored as affecting schools because:

*The government is sending a wrong message on this issue. More girls become pregnant because they are given a reward of going to school and the child grant. Sending them to school is just disturbing the school environment, especially us girls because you get worried instead of focusing on learning, that you can be the next victim (Grade 11 female student, school 2).*

Similarly, the mainstream girls at school 1 also concurred that teenage pregnancy should be clearly defined by the government as a punishable deviant social behaviour as a lesson to the young generation of women. To one such mainstream schoolgirl, allowing pregnant girls to be in school just like they had done nothing wrong raised a lot of questions to school and government authorities:

*It's unfortunate that we as girls are made to learn from these bad practices. What do other girls or boys think to sit with a pregnant person in the same class? How about male teachers, can they take such a girl as a schoolgirl or a woman? Can there be good teaching or learning? One wonders where schools are going (Grade 12 female student, school 1).*

We interpreted these negative views to the enrolment of pregnant schoolgirls in formal schools as an indication that pregnant learners could find it difficult to freely associate with their teachers and fellow

classmates or to effectively participate in class and school activities. This implies that due to existing normative cultural and traditional beliefs on unplanned teenage pregnancy among teachers and students, formal schools may not be the effective means for extending equitable educational provision for pregnant schoolgirls.

Having observed that negative cultural and traditional beliefs on teenage pregnancy by teachers and learners could infringe on the educational access and participation by pregnant schoolgirls, we investigated how six pregnant learners who accepted to participate in the study felt about being in school in their state. As illustrated by some selected statements, their responses ranged from feelings of shame, embarrassment, fear, burdensome, isolation, self-pity, withdrawn, hopelessness; to confusion, gloomy, unconcerned and discouraged. One of the girls at school 1 expressed self-pity and felt isolated by her parents and friends because *"now I am seen by all the people who were once close to me as not worth their trust. They no more play with me. But I have to accept that it's my fault"*. In the same vein, one other from school 2 felt that:

*I am like a fish out of water; my friends are now those who are like me because we have the same problem. Even teachers, I can see that they don't consider us to be serious now. Even if I have a question to ask, it's difficult to approach teachers (Pregnant girl, school 2).*

Furthermore, it was also disclosed by one other learner that she lost her confidence and self-esteem at school since she became pregnant because; *"some teachers pass comments or examples in class that embarrass me during life orientation lessons"*.

As a conclusion from these concerns, this study revealed that apart from the formal access to schooling, pregnant learners enrolled at formal schools may not reap the expected and more fundamental educational benefits because they lacked active participation in school activities

because of likely exclusion and isolation by both their teachers and schoolmates.

*Misplaced child and democratic rights*

Since attainment of democracy in South Africa, education has been declared as one basic human right according to the constitution's bill of rights (Constitution of Republic of South Africa, Number 108, 1996; Prinsloo, 2005; Bray, 1996; South African Schools Act [SASA] Number 84, 1996). In view of this, focus group study participants were asked to discuss how schools could assist girls who could fall pregnant while at school to exercise their right to education. Most of the interviewed school-based stakeholders were aware that it is on the basis of the country's constitution that pregnant teenagers, like any other citizens, should not be denied the right to schooling in South Africa. However, most teachers and mainstream learners maintained that democratisation of education for pregnant learners should not destroy the good cultural fabrics that held society together. As adults, most teachers felt that permissive child rights have misled some children to the extent that they can challenge their parents and teachers if they are corrected for bad behaviour. There was a strong feeling among the teachers that without depriving children their basic democratic privileges; *"child rights should not make children irresponsible such that they do whatever they want while we watch them going the wrong way"* (Male teacher, school 1). Making specific reference to schoolgirl pregnancy, another male teacher from school 1 expressed the generally held concern that:

*Too much democracy in the country has destroyed our children because they know that they cannot be canned or expelled from school for any reason. Some girls who are pregnant think they are adults like teachers and are difficult to discipline and we just ignore them to protect ourselves from being accused of child abuse* (Male teacher, school 1).

Even female teachers also blamed extreme measures in extending children's rights by the government as a contributing factor to

the increase in schoolgirl pregnancies, which negatively impacted against the education of girls in the country. One such female teacher from school 2 complained that *"schoolgirls come to school like ladies putting on mini-skirts, facial make-ups and dreaded hair which attracts sexual abuses and rape"*. Another equally disturbed female teacher made reference to the good olden days when, when according to her:

*In the past there was nothing like a pregnant child at school. The pupils knew that either you at school as a child or at home as a mother if you get pregnant. Children today are allowed to go away with murder because of this thing called child rights and child abuse* (Female teacher, school 1).

The message from teachers was that pregnant learners are undeserving elements in the school system whose irresponsible behavior warranted expulsion from school as a punitive measure.

In focus groups, learners who learnt with pregnant schoolgirls at the time this study was conducted were also asked to explain how schools could help girls who could fall pregnant while at school to exercise their right to education. Like their teachers, almost all the students, who were drawn from grade 10 to 12, or the further education and training (FET) phase, were aware that all people in South Africa had a constitutional right to education. There was however a general perception that the right to education is a principle that should be applied to law abiding citizens as illustrated by the words of one of the male grade 10 learners at school 2 that; *"people can only get their rights in a country if they are also right with the laws of the country"*. To most of the mainstream learners therefore, *"schoolgirls who are pregnant are just like law breakers, but they cannot be sent to the real prison. They should be stopped from coming to school as a punishment"* (Grade 12 male student, school 1). Similar sentiments were strongly expressed by male mainstream learners at both schools that *"rule benders like pregnant girls should not have their full rights at school like they have not done anything wrong"* (Grade 12 male student, school 2). One such strong feeling

from male students is exemplified by the following statement:

*It is shameful to the whole community and family to become pregnant while at school and measures should be taken to prevent such a shame. They should lose their rights so that other girls can learn* (Grade 11 male student, school 1).

However, while the boys seemed to use stronger language and tone, the girls in this category were sympathetic and mild in expressing the same concern because, *“it is not a crime for a girl to become pregnant because we are women, we should only understand that parental role and schooling do not go hand in hand”* (Grade 12 female student, school 1). Another focus group female student participant at the other school put forward the idea that pregnant learners can make it difficult for teachers to institute disciplinary measures because she recalled that:

*...one of the pregnant girls once said to a teacher; please teacher respect me, I am now an adult person like you. We are burdening teachers with unnecessary things that make their work difficult. The best solution is to stay at home if you think you are now an adult* (Grade 12 female student, school 2).

There were however a few female students at school 1 who had the courage to depart from the trend of attacking pregnant schoolgirls by questioning the injustice of only punishing the girl child *“...as if she made herself pregnant, the boys or men who rape girls continue with their rights”* (Grade 12 female student, school 1). A call was therefore made by this small group of female students that there should be equal punishment for both people involved in the pregnancy and to consider each case in its own context, as summed up by the following selected extracts:

*Some girls are pregnant not because of their choice, it can be due to sexual abuse by old men or even raped at gunpoint. Should they be denied the right to learn? Otherwise most people*

*just talk but we don't know what caused each and every girl to become pregnant* (Grade 11 female student, school 1).

In the same vein it was also expressed that where a girl entered into a consensual relationship and then fall pregnant, both parties should face the consequences not the girl alone because,

*It all starts with men but us women are made to suffer all the consequences by losing education and looking after the baby again. Some boys impregnate girls, continue with their education and get a good job while the girls stop school and become poor. If we share a bed we must also share the burdens* (Grade 12 female student, school 2).

A close analysis of the views of both male and female students, especially those who were in grade 12, shows that while there was a difference in the language and tone, they both concurred in principle that schoolgirls who fell pregnant cannot be allowed to enjoy their full right to educational access. From this, we concluded that that such a negative perception could also have negative implications on how the enrolled pregnant learners interacted with their mainstream peers. This observation is in tandem with the earlier stated concern by the interviewed pregnant learners that they lost company, friendship and trust of their friends and teachers when it was noticed that they were pregnant.

#### *Schools loss of authority over learners*

The teachers who taught and had experience in teaching pregnant schoolgirls were asked to explain how they coped with the responsibility of assisting this marginalised group of students. Instead of indicating some intervention strategies, most of the interviewed teachers raised concerns that they lost their authority to discipline a schoolgirl once she is declared pregnant and this rendered schools ungovernable especially for male teachers because *“once other girls realise that a male teacher is lenient with a pregnant, they become suspicious that he is responsible for*

*impregnating the girl*" (Male teacher, school 2). Most male teachers felt that they were at crossroads on the issue of teenage and schoolgirl pregnancy because they could be targeted by the other school-based education stakeholders for reasons that ranged from being suspected of impregnating girls and being seduced by some loose schoolgirls. One other teacher from the same school added supported his colleague by pointing out that:

*Yes, if you are helpful or are not strict with a pregnant learner as a young male teacher, female teachers start to rumour in the staffroom that you are either responsible or you are seeking some sexual favours from these girls, who are mostly sexually loose. It is even dangerous at this school to just stare at a pregnant girl* (Male teacher, school 2).

Both male and female teachers expressed the fear that disciplining or even assisting a pregnant learner could put their job at great risk in the event that something wrong or a complication happens to such a girl. As a way of protecting themselves, teachers resorted to extinction of behaviour, whereby they have to pretend not to notice any wrong acts committed by pregnant learners or even deliberately ignore them. This strategy was summed up by one male teacher from school 1 who suggested that:

*Most pregnant girls know that teachers will not punish them even if they do not hand in their schoolwork; because if you punish them, they can fake some complications which can put the teacher into problems with the law. So to be on the safe side we just leave them* (Male teacher, school 1).

Female teachers on their part also felt insecure to assist pregnant learners if they develop even simple pregnancy related health problems because according to health regulations, they are not qualified health professionals to give such assistance. As a protection measure, lady teachers also resorted to withholding their assistance, as narrated by one of the female teachers at school 2 that:

*Although I have given birth three times now, I would not risk to assist a pregnant girl at school because they can turn around against you. These are immature people; one can try abortion on her own and tell her parents that it was the teacher's idea.* (Female teacher, school 2).

On the basis of all these expressed hesitations and misgivings to assist enrolled pregnant schoolgirls by both male and female teachers, it was concluded from the gathered data that the enrolled pregnant learners at the two schools where the study was conducted only had mere access to schooling without any meaningful benefits in terms of participating in learning activities.

To cross check what was said by the teachers, each of the six pregnant learners who studied at the two schools were asked to indicate what type of help they had received from teachers and other learners since becoming pregnant. They all painted a gloomy picture in which each one of them felt neglected by teachers and isolated by their classmates such one indicated that *"it is better at home than at school because at least my granny talks to me and gives me some hope"*. To illustrate the change in attitude by teachers to her, one pregnant learner at school 2 had this to say:

*I used to talk in class but now teachers seem to avoid me even if I put my hand up to answer a question. I have stopped to try to say anything because there is no encouragement from teachers. If I bring my book for marking late because I had gone to the clinic, the teacher can tell you that it cannot be found or even change that I did not bring it. This makes me to lose hope that I will ever but God knows* (Grade 12 pregnant learner, school 2).

As an indication that even female teachers did not give the much expected help since they are also women, it was surprising that all the six interviewed pregnant learners complained that female teachers were actually caused of being more atrocious and scornful than their male counterparts. One

grade 11 pregnant learner at school 1 summed it all by narrating her own experience:

*I thought ladies would give me support and encouragement but they even say many bad things to other teachers and school children. Whenever I pass some lady teachers, they start to laugh and say nasty jokes about me. How can you ask for help from such people? Us women enjoy it to see other women in trouble* (Grade 11 pregnant learner, school 1).

Prompted by the negative perceptions and views from teachers and pregnant learners, we found it necessary to also hear the side of story from mainstream learners. Asked to explain how they supported their pregnant classmates to continue with studies, the majority of the mainstream sounded reluctant to associate with pregnant colleagues for fear of being negatively labelled. Most of their sentiments hinged on the socially constructed assumption that *“it is said birds of the same feathers flock together, and if you play or always help a pregnant learner, even your own parents can be angry with that”*(Grade 11 female learner, school1). Such was found to be the main reason why the interviewed pregnant learners observed that they were now isolated by most people who used to be their close associates. Likewise, most girls at the two schools felt that *“it is safer to leave the pregnant girls to deal with their own mess because everybody will think that you are also naughty”* (Grade 12 female learner, school 2). One female learner narrated that she was even warned by a teacher who was her relative at the school that:

*What business do you have with Rhoda? (not real name). So you also like to be like her? Remember your parents said I should look after you. Stop playing with her today or else I will come home so that your mother knows that I warned you* (Grade 12 female learner, school1).

Boys on their part also expressed the fear that; *“unless she is known to be your close relative, you hear people starting to gossip*

*that you are the father of the womb”* (Grade 12 male learner, school 2). Similarly, at the other school, it was even alleged that:

*The girls who are pregnant cannot be trusted because they are loose. One can tempt you knowing pretty sure that she is already pregnant from an old sugar-daddy who cannot marry her. Let’s say you play with her or just help her because you are from the same village, she can go around telling lies that I am her boyfriend because she is shy to tell the truth about her old sugar-daddy* (Grade 12 male learner, school1).

Data gathered from all the three categories of sampled school-based participants for this study therefore pointed to the fact that although pregnant learners were physically in school, there was little evidence to suggest that they were meaningfully engaged in school activities. Their teachers withdrew their assistance and guidance to pregnant learners because they feared to be legally implicated, while their classmates feared to be negatively labelled and stigmatised like the pregnant counterparts. We therefore concluded that in order for the provision of equitable educational opportunity to be extended to pregnant learners, both teachers and mainstream learners at schools that enrolled pregnant learners needed to be empowered with skills, attitudes and the political will to assist learners in this category.

### **Discussion**

This study revealed that while the different educators at both schools were generally aware of all children’s democratic right to education in terms of the Bill of rights in the South African constitution, they did not know that in 2007 the Department of Education (DoE) had put in place policy guidelines on how schools should prevent and manage schoolgirl pregnancy. It was noted from the study that even school principals were not different from ordinary teachers on this matter because it would seem that the DoE had not cascaded the policy through the education structures from head office down to schools. This may not be a surprise in view of earlier findings by Runhare (2010) and Runhare and

Vandeyar (2012) which indicated that there was inadequate policy dialogue in South African schools. Van Wyk and Lemmer (2004), Mncube (2007) and Mncube and Harber (2008) also found out that learners and community representatives in school governing bodies (SGBs) did not have much say on policy issues and that decision making was largely centralised in school principals. These findings concur with the finding by the current study in that inadequate knowledge on the education policy that aimed to effectively democratise the educational access and participation of pregnant learners is a result of inadequate policy dialogue and dissemination process within the whole Department of Basic Education right from the top down to the school level.

Due to existing normative cultural and traditional beliefs on unplanned teenage pregnancy among teachers and students, this study revealed that the two schools where the study was conducted could not effectively provide equitable educational provision for pregnant schoolgirls. There were negative perceptions to the inclusion of pregnant schoolgirls by teachers and mainstream learners such that pregnant learners found it difficult to freely associate with their teachers and fellow classmates and this compromised their capacity to participate in class and school activities. We therefore concluded that despite the democratisation of educational access to schooling for pregnant teenagers in South Africa (Runhare, 2010; Runhare & Vandeyar, 2011, 2012; Manzini, 2001; Grant & Hallman, 2006), on the ground there were socio-cultural perceptions and attitudes that militated against the full participation of pregnant learners in school curricular activities. Even in developed nations where legal frameworks that prohibit unfair treatment of pregnant and parenting teenagers in formal education have been in place for decades, social resistance to their full integration in education by education administrators and communities is not uncommon (Brundis & Philliber, 1998; Chilisa, 2002; Bayona & Kandji-Murangi, 1996; Hubbard et al., 2008).

Despite their knowledge that just like every South African child, pregnant learners had constitutional right to education, most teachers and mainstream learners maintained that the inclusion of pregnant learners into ordinary schools destroyed the cultural values on sexuality that held society together. The teachers felt that it was too permissive and misleading to allow pregnant schoolgirls to continue with schooling because they were a bad example to other children and therefore deserved to be excluded as corrective measure. This therefore indicated that there is usually a split between policy and practice since the school publics did not implement what they knew about pregnant learners' right to education because of culturally embedded belief systems.

This study revealed that enrolled pregnant learners could not fully concentrate on their academic work because of psycho-social instability that included feeling ashamed, embarrassed, burdened, isolated, self-incapacitated, hopeless; confused, unconcerned and discouraged at school. This observation from the current study is in tandem with the earlier studies which indicated that once a school girl was discovered to be pregnant, she would not enjoy most of her childhood rights in the school, community and even in the family because of the negative labels that are associated with teenage pregnancy and motherhood in most African societies (Mensch et al., 2001; Chilisa, 2002; Chigona & Chetty 2007, 2008; Runhare, 2010; Runhare & Vandeyar, 2011). Most literature on gender inequalities in society indicates that gender ideologies, traditional limitations on pregnancy and motherhood have negative effects on women educational access, participation and outcomes, especially in African conservative societies (Leach, 2000; Runhare, 2003; Stromquist, 2005; Subrahmanian, 2005; McGaha-Garnett, 2007). Pregnant teenagers could resort to self-pity as a defence mechanism because unlike other marginalised groups, such as the disabled and minority ethnic groups, teenage mothers do not have social institutions that advocate for their concerns due to conservative views towards sexuality

in most societies (Brundis & Philliber, 1998; Weigand, 2005).

With regard to their anti-natal needs, there was no specialised service provision at both schools where the study was carried out and teachers expressed the fear to assist a pregnant learner if she reported feeling ill because they were not qualified to render any medical help. However, the teachers used this as a scapegoat for not helping pregnant learners even on their academic needs which made pregnant learners to express the concern that they were neglected and were outcasts in the school. This was not an isolated observation due to conservative socio-cultural perceptions in most societies. In the USA, Brundis and Philliber (1998:243) observed that “the attitudes expressed by administrators and teachers are primarily responsible for pregnant students leaving school”. In Botswana, studies by Chilisa (2002), Bayona and Kandji-Murangi (1996), Meekers and Ahmed (1999) and Hubbard et al. (2008) found that communities opposed the re-enrolment of former pregnant teenagers into school. More recently, Runhare (2010), Runhare and Vandeyar (2011, 2012) found out that while pregnant teenagers had legal right to continue with formal schooling, they were not benefiting from the available legal provisions because of inadequate knowledge on policy and resistance from education duty bearers. In Zimbabwe, Runhare (2010) reported that school administrators and communities condoned the expulsion of pregnant schoolgirls although this is against an existing policy provision of 1999 by the Ministry of Education Sports and Culture. This study therefore concluded that despite their legal right to schooling, the negative attitudes and lack of political will to assist pregnant learners by other school-based education stakeholders, there was political symbolism (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Anderson, 1997; Argyris, 1990; Jansen 2001, 2002) in schools which hindered the educational participation of enrolled pregnant schoolgirls.

### Conclusion

Generally, this study revealed that school-based stakeholders had socio-cultural

perceptions and attitudes that compromised the interaction of enrolled pregnant learners with and service provision from the other school based stakeholders. Despite that education is a basic human right for all South Africans, including girls who could fall pregnant before completing their education; the study revealed that there were conservative and traditional values, norms and practices that hindered the effective democratisation of formal schooling for pregnant schoolgirls and teenage mothers. It may also be inferred from this that many schoolgirls who continued with schooling during and after pregnancy in South African schools could be leaving school without meaningful educational outcomes to enable them access into higher education. It is therefore recommended that a quantitative study be conducted to track the post- school educational and occupational outcomes of girls who fell pregnant while in high school.

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